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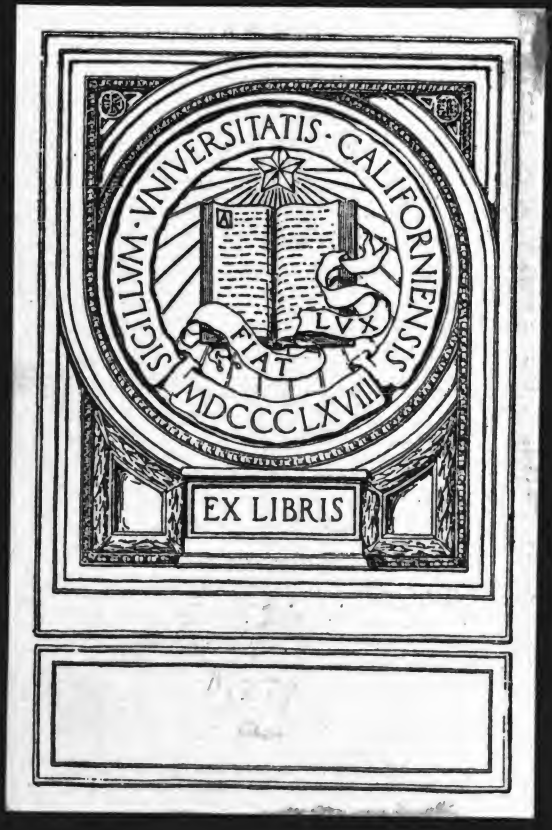
Applied minor tactics

John Frank Morrison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Lecture by

Major J. F. Morrison, General Staff

Assistant Commandant

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Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

1911

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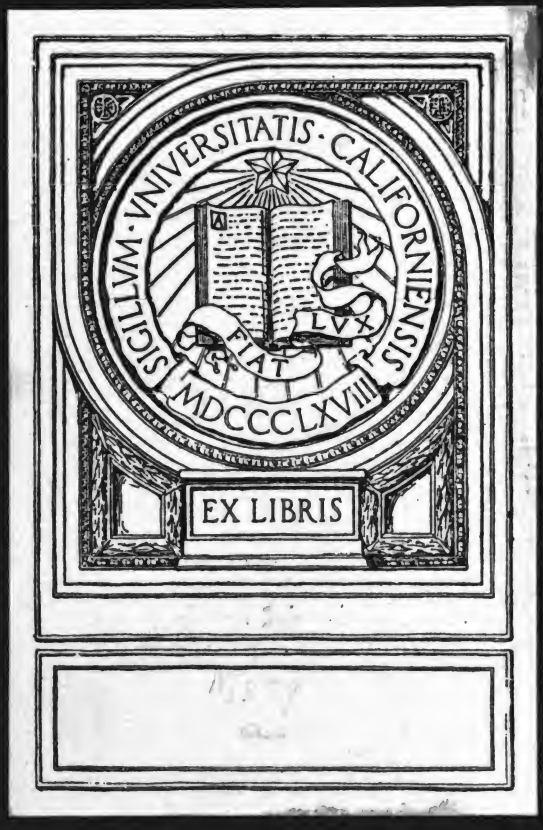
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APPLIED MINOR TACTICS

By Major J. F. Morrison, General Staff, Assistant Commandant Army School of the Line and Army Staff College.

Paper read before St. Louis Convention of the National Guard Association of the United States.

Applied Minor Tactics is a big subject to treat in 30 minutes. It involves the map problem, terrain exercise, war game, maneuver and battle.

The same general method, however, should be used in all.

All the others are but a preparation for battle and are valuable only as they conform in principle to what should be done then.

My talk will consist in giving a few hints that should be followed in the solution of such problems.

The map problem and terrain exercise are the simplest and are generally the ones to begin with. You have but one phase of an action and your information is reliable. The war game comes next in difficulty, one phase of action follows another rapidly and due to your opponent, conditions may change; your information is not so complete and reliable. Your troops, however, being slips of paper, are completely subject to your will, when ordered to a certain place, they can't misunderstand your instructions and go wrong, they don't straggle or get careless; they are perfect troops.

In the maneuver the problem is the same except that you are dealing with men and the control is not

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so perfect, there is much more chance for mistakes, and poor work by subordinates may ruin your plan.

A battle is but a maneuver to which is added great physical danger and more or less excitement. It is the same game, but in the maneuver you are playing for matches, in battle for human lives.

The responsibility resting on an officer in war is great. His mistakes are paid for in blood. To seek a command in war beyond his capabilities is no less criminal than for a man with no knowledge of a locomotive or railroading attempting to run the engine of an express on a busy line.

It stands us all in hand to fit ourselves as best we can for such responsibilities as will come to us in the next war.

As Von Schellendorf says, the best preparation for war is maneuver work. And the history of Prussia shows that her great military successes followed periods of great attention to maneuvers and her disastrous defeats when this work had been neglected.

The small maneuver is of vital importance. You must have good companies, battalions and regiments before you can have a good army.

The map problem and war game are but aids to maneuvers. They can be practiced without troops and when maneuvers are impossible. Their practice will make the maneuvers better, for you thus learn the principles of tactics and in the quickest way.

Maneuvers that violate every tactical principle are harmful unless the lessons taught by our mistakes are brought home to us. In this paper the hints I offer apply equally to all tactical exercises.

In a paper of this length the whole field of tactics can not be covered but I have tried to invite attention to those I believe most important to consider, judged by the work of our troops, Regular and State.

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In solving a tactical problem, whether on the map or on the ground, with or without troops, whether it be a maneuver or a battle you should perform an operation that may be divided as follows: Estimating the situation, forming your decision or plan, then giving the necessary order to carry out your plan.

The estimate of the situation is the first step. It is important. Don't get the idea that it only applies to map problems; it applies to all.

In estimating the situation the first step is to determine your mission, what you are to do, what you are to accomplish.

Consider next your own force and that of the enemy; that is, his probable strength and how it compares with yours.

Consider other conditions favorable and unfavorable, as relative quality of troops, etc.

Consider what the enemy will probably do.

Consider the terrain in so far as it effects the problem.

Now consider the different courses open to you with the advantages and disadvantages of each.

You are now ready to come to a decision which is a clear, concise statement of what you propose to do and how you propose to do it.

This is called estimating the situation. I have heard the objection raised that this is too long a process, that except in map problems you must act more promptly than this would allow.

The objection is not well taken. It might be if it were contemplated to write it all out, but this is not the case. The mind works rapidly in accustomed channels. The child beginning the study of arithmetic is very slow in determining the sum of 7, 8 and 9, but later the answer is announced almost at sight.

The same is true in tactical problems; it may be

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a slow process at first but with a little practice your decision is reached very quickly, is likely to be correct, to be one you will not want to change every few minutes.

An accountant who guessed at the sum of a column of figures instead of correctly adding them would not be apt to ball up his books more than would a commander his tactical work who failed to properly estimate his situation. By writing this estimate out for a few times carefully it soon becomes unnecessary, The boy soon gets past the point where he must count on his fingers.

The important thing is to come to a clear and correct decision, do it promptly and then execute it vigorously.

Now for a few hints as to your plan or decision. They are not a précis of tactics but a few important points to be borne in mind. They cover the most frequent tactical sins of the maneuvers.

The new Japanese Field Service Regulations contain the following: "There are two things that should be avoided above all by military commanders —inaction and hesitation. To act resolutely even in an erroneous manner is better than to remain inactive and irresolute."

Frederick the Great expressed it in fewer words: "Don't haggle."

Having settled on a plan push it through, don't vacillate.

Make your plan simple. No other has much show.

Complicated plans often look well on paper and a cheap victory seems to be offered, but in war and even in maneuvers they seldom work out. They require many people to do the right thing at the right time and this under conditions of excitement, danger and confusion. They generally fail.

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Better select a simple plan that you know you can execute; it will be less costly in the end.

On the field, in the heat and excitement of battle, you can do little maneuvering; the attack once launched all you can do is to let it take its course, influencing it of course by the judicious use of the reserves. It is wisely said that a line once thoroughly committed to the attack under modern conditions has but three things it can do, push forward, halt, and retreat.

Hard and fast rules cannot generally be given in tactics but we must bear in mind what gives victory—the inflicting on the enemy a loss which he will not stand before he can do the same to you. This necessary loss varies; it is subject to many conditions. Every body of troops, like all timbers, have their breaking point and if we can force the enemy's loss to his breaking point before he gets ours we win.

"Weapons improve but human nature remains the same." It takes no more, if as much, killing to break a body of troops today as 50 years ago.

Do not confuse losses in battle with breaking loss. Remember that when a force breaks, turns its back on a nearby enemy, its losses pile up very rapidly, and generally exceed all losses previous to the break.

This breaking loss would soon come if we could shoot on the battlefield as we do on the target range, but we cannot even approximate it.

There are many causes tending to drag down our score on the battlefield, one of the most potent being the effect of the enemy's fire. It is cited as a physiological fact that fear and great excitement causes the pupil of the eye to dilate and impair accuracy in vision and hence the shooting. It is well established that the effectiveness of the fire of one side is reduced proportionately to the effectiveness of that of the other.

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Bear in mind then these two points—we must get the enemy's breaking point before he gets ours, and the more effective we make our fire the less effective will be his.

Expressed in another way—to win you must gain and keep a fire superiority.

This generally means more rifles in action, yet a fire badly controlled and directed though great in volume may be less effective than a smaller volume better handled.

The firing line, barring a few exceptional cases, then, should be as heavy as practicable consistent with the men's free use of their rifles.

This has been found to be about one man to the yard. In this way you get volume of fire and the companies do not cover so much ground that their commanders lose their power to direct and control.

If it becomes necessary to hold a line too long for the force available, it is then better to keep the men close together and leave gaps in the line. The men are so much better controlled, the fire better directed, the volume the same, and the gaps are closed by the cross fire of parties adjacent.

The Field Service Regulations tell us to attack the front and a flank and that straight frontal attacks are too costly.

This has caused much misunderstanding, but if you take it as really meant it as all right.

Frontal attacks are in one sense of the word about the only kind you ever will make.

If the enemy knows the game, when your flank attack is delivered he will be there to meet you and locally your attack will be frontal. But your entire line will be longer and being enveloping will have a better direction.

An enveloping fire is very desirable but not always obtainable and you may have to attack square

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in front. Such attacks are not hopeless and need not be excessive in cost.

Then in planning an attack try to bring about an enveloping attack, if practicable, without too wide dispersion, but do not give up a proper attack simply because it must be frontal. Better the latter than the other if the separation of the parts is too great. For a regiment this extention should seldom exceed 800 yards between extended flanks and a mile may be taken as extreme for a brigade.

A turning movement therefore is not allowable in small commands.

In your plan provide ample reserves at the beginning. In the attack you must keep your firing line up to its full strength if you expect to carry it forward to victory. This will require many men for you must replace the killed, wounded, skulkers and the exhausted.

You must have reserves to meet unexpected developments, extend your line to meet a corresponding extension of the enemy, protect yourself from a flank attack by detachments of the enemy, if defeated to cover your withdrawal, if victorious to reap the fruits of victory.

In a real attack, vigorously pushed, the men at first on the firing line will vary from one-half to one-tenth of the entire force. A small command naturally does not require as much reserve as a big one.

Reserves here is used in its broadest sense and includes local supports.

You must look out for your flanks. If both your flanks are absolutely secure, as in some defile, the very selection of the position looks out for them.

Generally detachments must be sent to one or both flanks to secure you against an unexpected attack from that direction. Remember that being caught unawares is an unpardonable sin.

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In small commands these flanking groups will vary from two men to a company depending on whether they are merely to observe and report or to delay the enemy. Avoid dispersion and undue extension. Do not make a detachment before a battle unless necessary and then make it as small as possible. This is one of the maxims of Napoleon repeated in other words by Clausewitz and many other authorities since.

Undue extension of your line is but another form of dispersion and equally bad. A long thin line is helpless before an enemy who plays the game.

Don't be in too big a hurry to commit more men than necessary to the action. Remember shifting men once engaged is very difficult and often impossible.

In a map problem the information of the enemy is given you; you cannot reconnoiter to gain it. With troops either in battle or maneuver it takes good reconnaissance to gain very accurate knowledge of the enemy. You will guess wrong very often. It is therefore generally better to put in only as many men as necessary to fully develop the hostile strength and position and increase the force engaged as your information becomes positive.

Keep up your reconnaissance.

Here remember the words of Frederick the Great, "Don't haggle."

Carry out your plan vigorously, put in enough men to do the work and do it promptly—just as soon as you *know* what is to be done and where. Not in driblets.

If you have a choice in the direction your attack is to take study the ground carefully and give it that direction most to your advantage. Generally this will be where the most cover is offered you, but not always.

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There will sometimes be other reasons that outweigh the advantage of cover. Good sense alone can determine. If you are supported by artillery, where can they help the most and longest?

A direction of attack may be good as to cover but so situated as to mean ruin if defeated as where it puts an impassable obstacle directly in your rear. The enemy also should be considered in this connection, how can you do him the most harm?

Having campleted your estimate, form your plan, it must now be expressed in the form of an order.

No matter how perfect your plan, if your orders will not cause its execution you fail.

Your order must first give your subordinates sufficient information of the situation and your plan that they can clearly understand their mission. This comes first.

It must make clear to each what he is to do.

It must be clear, concise and definite. In large commands you must state where you will be, and, I might add, then stay there.

The better everyone understands the whole situation the better he can play his part. Unexpected things are always hapening in war, a subordinate can only act intelligently if he understands your point of view.

Make it short and make it definite. One hasn't time on a battlefield to read unnecessary literary productions. Above all don't give vague orders. Be positive and definite. Don't try to shift responsibility.

It is well to follow the form given in the Field Service Regulations, but that is not so important as that you fulfill the other requirements.

To acquire a working knowledge of Minor Tactics I can only advise practice first with map problems, then the other forms. Write out your solution at first, check it up for the points on the sheet I have

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given you and any others you know. Don't follow rules blindly. Remember common sense and knowledge of men are the best guides.

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